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## **1-18-08 – Viral Marketing Strategies in Hollywood Cinema**

Stephanie Janes

Viral is a term which is now commonly used to describe entire marketing campaigns, or elements of promotional strategies for any number of consumer goods, services, and media products. This chapter will focus particularly on Hollywood's use of viral marketing, in particular, more complex viral campaigns which encourage immersion in and interaction with the world of the film before, during and after viewing, allowing the viewer to shape, or at least appear to shape, their cinematographic experience. It will suggest that viral campaigns mark a shift away from what Justin Wyatt (1994) calls 'high concept' filmmaking and marketing. Campaigns for films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Cloverfield* (2008), *A.I.* (2001) and *The Dark Knight* (2008), demonstrate a change in the relationship between producer and consumer to a stage where producers are encouraging consumers to be active, rather than passive, withholding information on forthcoming releases, and daring them to follow trails of online clues to get at it. This move to encourage agency or the appearance of agency, in the cinematographic experience is often discouraged in other areas of the industry, e.g. distribution. This chapter therefore questions the motives behind such elaborate online campaigns, arguing that the deliberate positioning of the viewer as investigator is accompanied by an extension of the filmic world (as opposed to simply an extension of narrative online) to produce a seemingly immersive experience that can be, but is not always, reflected in the aesthetics of the film itself, and that can transform a piece of marketing material into an entertainment experience in its own right.

### **Defining Viral Marketing**

The term 'viral' is one that has only recently become a part of our everyday media vocabulary. No longer confined to diseases or computer bugs, anything from advertising campaigns, to dancing hamsters and videos of cats playing the keyboard have been described as having 'gone viral'. But, when we attempt to define what 'viral marketing' is, it becomes clear that the meaning of this now familiar phrase is somewhat blurry.

One reason for this is that 'viral marketing' tends to overlap with related concepts such as 'buzz' or 'word-of-mouth'. Some definitions specifically attach it to online marketing campaigns, for example: 'A high tech and 'impersonal' variation on word-of-mouth... an internet-driven strategy that enables and encourages people to pass along a marketing message' (Mohr, 2007: 297). Others are more generalised, defining 'viral' as any strategy which 'encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message... creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence' (Chad and Watier, 2009). What can be agreed is that the term was not significantly used before the 1990s, and so is at least chronologically associated with the growth of the Internet, as a public and commercial communications network. The implications of the word 'viral' also separates it from the term 'word-of-mouth' as it suggests that the marketing message spreads as quickly as a biological or computer virus, again linking it to the high-speed communications offered by the internet. One may surmise then, that viral marketing includes, but is not limited to, online marketing, and that equally, not all online marketing can be termed viral.

There is also a general consensus that the key to viral marketing is 'getting customers to pass along a company's marketing message to friends, family and colleagues' (Lauden and Traver, 2007: 74). This has become easier in the internet age. The informality of email, and the centrality of social networking sites in the lives of many consumers has provided us with extensive numbers of friends and friends-of-friends, whose interests we might be familiar with, and to whom we might recommend, via a hyperlink, a website, a funny video, a clever advert etc. The emphasis is on understanding consumer-consumer relationships and knowing your audience well enough to predict their referral behaviour. A working definition of viral marketing could therefore be, *a marketing strategy which encourages consumers to pass on a message to others, usually, but not necessarily, using the internet to do so.*

## **Hollywood and Online Marketing**

Viral marketing therefore has strong links with word of mouth publicity, which has always been crucial to selling a movie but with the emergence of blogs and public review websites, more people can share more opinions faster than ever before. Yong Liu also suggests that it's not even the quality of the word-of-mouth (i.e. negative or positive) that counts; the mere volume of online 'chatter' about a film can be linked to box office revenue (Liu, 2006). The problem with online word-of-mouth is that it is impossible to control completely, and although Liu's study suggests otherwise, there is evidence to suggest the industry still fears the influence of negative word-of-mouth, particularly from certain demographics, such as teenagers (Neuborne, 2001). As a result, Hollywood has often viewed the Internet as a battleground for Intellectual Property (IP) rights, rather than as a communicative link to its audiences. Well-documented confrontations include Warner Brothers' attempt to close down fan-created *Harry Potter* websites, and New Line's more friendly approach of collaborating with a select number of *Lord of the Rings* fan sites, offering content to be circulated by fans rather than through official channels.

The industry's initial forays into online marketing demonstrated either a disinterest in or lack of understanding about the interactive capabilities of the medium, leading J.P. Telotte to describe early promotional film websites as little more than 'electronic posters' or 'press kits for the digital age' (Telotte, 2001: 34). Promotional film websites have existed since the birth of e-commerce in around 1993 (Craig, 2005: 329-330), but if one takes a sample of Hollywood films released between 1996 and 1999<sup>1</sup> it becomes clear that film websites varied in terms of quality, content, and interactivity. For instance, [www.rzm.com/pvt.ryan](http://www.rzm.com/pvt.ryan), the site for *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, USA, 1998), is fairly sparse, with information about the cast and crew, basic details of the story, and information on the official book. Other sites, like [www.titanicmovie.com](http://www.titanicmovie.com), the website for James Cameron's *Titanic* (James Cameron, USA, 1997), takes more advantage of the interactivity provided by the internet, encouraging users to 'tour the ship'. This site offers video clips, character profiles, interviews with cast and director and details on the history of the Titanic. In contrast, <http://www.movies.warnerbros.com/twister/cmp/swirl.html>, the website for *Twister* (Jan de Bont, USA, 1996), poses as the site for the 'Severe Weather Institute Research Lab' website, calling for the user to join them as a 'storm chaser' via a newspaper advertisement. It then offers a variety of information on tornadoes which the user will require to pass the 'storm chaser test'.

As Telotte points out, all these sites point away from their own entertainment value and towards 'the film experience... situating their films in the context of the film industry and pointing to the entertainment power of the movies' (Telotte, 2001: 34). The only site that works slightly differently is *Twister's*. By posing as a real site for a fictional institute within the film, the user is briefly removed from their role as a consumer, and is invited into the world of the film to participate as a 'storm chaser'. More obvious promotional information such as cast interviews and stills are available, but links are in a smaller font at the bottom of the page. This information clearly takes a back seat to the storm chaser game. The site is a piece of entertainment in itself and thus a different kind of promotional tool. This may be an earlier and more basic example of the kind of online marketing widely regarded to have started three years later, with *The Blair Witch Project* (Sanchez and Myrick, USA, 1999).

Blairwitch.com marked a radical departure from the promotional website as electronic press kit. It positioned the film as a piece of found footage, discovered after the disappearance of three film students in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland. It offered information on the missing students, positioning the viewer as investigator and directing them back to the film as the final piece of the puzzle. The innovative website was given almost full credit for the

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<sup>1</sup> 1996 is the earliest retrievable year using Internet Archive ([www.web.archive.org](http://www.web.archive.org)). It is difficult to access film websites prior to this year as they either no longer exist and have not been archived, or have been updated to the point that their original state can no longer be accessed. For example, there may have been a website for *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, USA, 1993) at [www.jurassicpark.com](http://www.jurassicpark.com) but this is now home to information on the entire franchise. Internet Archive holds an entry for the site in Dec 1998 but states that this is an updated version, suggesting that there was a previous version of the site. Films used as examples here are thus based heavily on accessibility to the original official website.

financial success of the film (Lyons, 1999: 7-8), which had an initial budget of \$35,000 and took \$1.5m in its opening domestic box office weekend across a mere 27 screens (Maiese, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Taken as proof that more creative online marketing could seriously affect box office revenue, it placed web campaigning significantly higher on the agendas of media conglomerates.

Blairwitch.com could be taken as an example of an early viral site. Users were encouraged to investigate the case of the missing film students, with the site updating with more information as the release date drew closer. The positioning of the film as found footage shot by the students even had some viewers confused as to the reality status of the film (Schreier, 2004). This not only recognises an active rather than a passive consumer, it relies upon them to tell others about the website in order to perpetuate this reality premise, a key part of the marketing message.

This acknowledgement of an active viewer is also a movement away from previous Hollywood filmmaking and marketing trends, the most prominent being what Justin Wyatt terms High Concept (Wyatt, 1994). Wyatt considers marketing strategies in the decades directly before the emergence of the Internet, positing a connection between economics and film aesthetics. He argues that by recognising the impact of industrial and economic forces on the industry, we can see the emergence of a particular style of filmmaking in the 70s and 80s. High concept can be viewed as a form of product differentiation, characterised by 'an emphasis on style within the films and... an integration with marketing and merchandising' (Wyatt, 1994: 7). High concept films are identified by straightforward, easily summarised plots, notable stars, a strong match between image and soundtrack and pre-sold property. They also display a 'reliance on bold images' which 'reinforces the extraction of images for marketing and merchandising' (Wyatt, 1994: 17). Thus high concept films are produced with a specific aesthetic in mind: primarily visual and striking, which Wyatt links to the design of contemporary goods advertising (Wyatt, 1994: 23). Finally, Wyatt argues 'the modularity' of the film's units and one-dimensional characters distance the viewer from the traditional task of reading the film's narrative. Instead, the viewer becomes 'sewn in to the 'surface' of the film', contemplating the style and production values (Wyatt, 1994: 60).

Trailers for high concept films are therefore often straightforward in terms of their audience address. Wyatt quotes Steven Spielberg's assertion that 'if a person can tell me an idea in twenty-five words or less, it's going to make a pretty good movie' (Wyatt, 1994: 13). It will neatly summarise the plot, character types and generic characteristics of the film so that the intended target demographic knows exactly what they will be paying to see. Information about the film is therefore tightly controlled and viewer expectations are more easily met because they have been more clearly outlined in the promotional material.

By contrast, a viral trailer may encourage word-of-mouth rather than attempting to bypass it altogether. It may even withhold central plot information to build up hype and speculation, prompting users to search online for further information. The audience is no longer positioned in relation merely to the surface of the film, but is encouraged to become involved on a deeper level and to discover elements of the narrative for themselves. It anticipates and embraces the prospect of an inquisitive online audience, rather than trying to lock down audience activity.

Almost every marketing campaign for Hollywood films now involves a trailer, YouTube video, or website, which has the potential to 'go viral'. However, the kind of campaign I wish to discuss is more complex. It encourages not only referral from one consumer to another, but immersion in and interaction with the world of the film, before, during and after viewing. This allows the viewer to shape, or at least appear to shape, their own cinematographic experience. I will now use the campaign for *Cloverfield* as a case study to investigate the extent to which such campaigns immerse the viewer in the world of the films they are promoting, and the relationship such campaigns might have with the film's aesthetics. Finally,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Blair Witch Project* went on to gross \$140 million in the US (see <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/1999/BLAIR.php>)

I will consider a number of possible reasons as to why media conglomerates might choose to utilise such complex marketing campaigns to promote mainstream Hollywood films.

### **1-18-08 – The Cloverfield Campaign**

The Cloverfield campaign was a long and complex affair. Any analysis of the marketing campaign therefore requires at least a brief descriptive overview of the events as they unfolded online. A teaser trailer was released before screenings of *Transformers* (Michael Bay, USA, 2007) in June 2007. It starts with home video footage of a leaving party in a New York apartment for the main character Rob (Michael Stahl-David) who is leaving the city to work in Japan. Suddenly the lights go out, a terrifying sound screeches out of the darkness, and as the intrepid party-goers reach the roof of their apartment it becomes clear that something is attacking the city. Remaining behind the camera of the designated party documenter Hud (T.J. Miller), we follow the group of friends into the streets as they, and we, try to figure out what is going on. This trailer contains no title, no recognisable stars, and the bare bones of the film's plot. The only identifiable information attached is the name of producer J. J. Abrams of *Lost* (2004) fame and a release date of 1-18-08.<sup>3</sup> When curious viewers entered this date into search engines they embarked upon an expansive piece of viral marketing, an alternate reality game (ARG) set in the world of the film, as they tried to discover more information.<sup>4</sup>

1-18-08.com began life as an image of a single timecoded Polaroid photo; an extreme close up of two terrified female faces. More photos were added as the release date approached. If users waved the cursor over the photo it flipped over, sometimes revealing further information about the characters. This led to the discovery of MySpace pages for the main characters (figure 2). These were also updated in real time, giving the sense that the characters existed not just in a fictional filmic reality, but in the players' reality as well.

This is part of a key element to ARGs, known as This Is Not A Game (TINAG). A philosophy as much as a set of aesthetics, TINAG refers to the extent to which the game and characters in it appear to be 'real'. Websites must appear as they would do in 'real life', phone numbers must work, and emails must at least provide a plausible auto-response. This is expected to be upheld by players and game designers alike. For example, designers made it possible to contact Rob via a convincingly 'real' MySpace page. Equally, players who messaged Rob in the hope of gaining further information were careful to always address him as if he were a real person.

Rob's page also mentioned his new Japanese employer Slusho! Slusho was one of 4 subsidiaries of the fictional oil company Tagruato, and both had convincing corporate websites which were fully browsable. Through further online investigations, players could deduce that Tagruato was somehow involved in the creation or discovery of the creature attacking New York.

Fans immediately started rigorously searching these and many other related sites for clues as they were updated. Some even led to 'real world' interactions. For example, Tagruato's site reported on an incident at one of its drilling sites. To find out more, players could call the number +81-3-5403-6318.

This led to a voicemail message, which changed as the release date approached, offering updates on the situation at the site. Additionally, users who contacted any of the sites by email received sonar images of something underwater, heading towards New York, a few weeks before release.

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<sup>3</sup> Trailer accessed at <http://www.apple.com/trailers/paramount/cloverfield/>

<sup>4</sup> Although it is not within the scope of this chapter to interrogate the shifting definitions of an ARG, the following offers a good description: 'a cohesive narrative revealed through a series of websites, emails, phone calls, IM, live and in-person events. Players often earn new information to further the plot by cracking puzzles... the players of these games typically organise themselves into communities to share information and speculate on what it all means and where it's all going' (Phillips, 2005).

Fan response to this was documented on message boards showing how they followed up every possible route for more information.<sup>5</sup> The game ended when players went to see the film, which posed as 'found footage' from the day of the attack and documentary evidence of the monster, similar to the reality premise posed by *The Blair Witch* and its website. The following analysis considers how *Cloverfield* and its ARG could be seen to work together to create an immersive viewing experience.

### ***Immersion, Agency and Transformation***

Telotte argues (speaking specifically about *The Blair Witch Project*) that a website is important in creating a context within which the viewer reads the film. This is shaped by the filmmakers and/or distributors, controlling the kind of pleasures the audience might derive from it. However, he suggests that the effectiveness of *Blair Witch's* campaign was not the website alone, but the relationship it established between the site and the film, as they worked together to immerse the viewer in an alternative reality (Telotte, 2001). The fact that the film and website are so closely interlinked, he suggests, hints to viewers that the pleasures offered by the website may also be offered by the film.

He then links the pleasures offered by both website and film to those which Janet Murray claims are provided by computer based narratives, a term which covers computer games, navigation of the web and hypertexts, or online fictions (Murray, 1997).<sup>6</sup> Murray identifies these pleasures as immersion, agency and transformation (Murray, 1997). Both the viral marketing campaign for *Cloverfield* and the film itself could be seen to work together to offer these experiences.

Murray defines immersion as 'the pleasure of being 'submerged' in the world of the text, a movement into another world or realm' (Murray, 1997: 98). Immersion in the world of *Cloverfield* was, to some extent, created by its reality premise. Shot to look like one continuous event captured on hand-held camera, it asked audiences to believe that it was a document of the events of 1-18-08. Events unfolded in the game in real-time and the characters 'lived' online via their MySpace pages.<sup>7</sup> Clues leading to 'real world' interaction such as the phone call and voicemail from Tagruato, also developed a sense of almost physical participation in the world of the film. Importantly, this information was distributed through everyday media channels, accessed by players through websites, mobile phones and email accounts, naturalising the experience and making it feel as part of the players' day-to-day lives as possible. As Murray points out, 'the more realised the immersive environment, the more active we want to be within it' (Murray, 1997: 126).

With regards to film style, the stated intention of the filmmakers was to make the viewing experience as 'naturalistic and authentic' as possible (Abrams, 2009). Handheld shaky-cam gives an impression of presence and immediacy as well as disorientation, confusion and, for some audience members, nausea and motion sickness. Many reviews comment specifically on the physically involving nature of the film:

An hour in I started to sweat. I couldn't look at the grim stroboscopic lighting effects in the final reel and I nearly threw up trying to make sense of the increasingly chaotic and frightening scenes of the gripping climax (Christopher, 2008: 14).

If the viewer had been following the game online, their sense of involvement with the world of the film would have been extended by the film's aesthetics and vice versa if the sites were accessed post-viewing.

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<sup>5</sup> Some prominent ones included the forum on Unfiction.com archived at <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/index.php?f=232> Cloverfield Clues - <http://cloverfieldclues.blogspot.co.uk/> and Cloverfield News - <http://www.cloverfieldnews.com/>

<sup>6</sup> These texts use hyperlinks to allow the reader to take a narrative path through the story which is not necessarily linear.

<sup>7</sup> Many reviews criticised the lack of character development (Dargis, 2008) but this could be countered by the assertion that for many viewers the characters had already been developing online for months.

Murray defines agency as the ability to participate in the world of the text (Murray, 1997: 126). *Cloverfield's* campaign asked users not only to find the websites but to email them and call their phone numbers, from which they then received a response. What followed was a very specific response from internet-savvy viewers who interrogated each photo to the last pixel, checked the veracity of every verifiable fact and most importantly, posted on their blogs and message boards when they found something new to share with everyone else. Word-of-mouth spread and an online community was quickly established. Through their various conjectures they were using this information to create their own backstories to a film they knew little else about. These complex sites recognised an active, inquisitive and highly communicative audience.

In contrast, agency within the film is limited. We can only see what cameraman Hud sees. This frustration of agency adds to the tension and frightening effect of the film as viewers struggle to figure out what unthinkable horrors might lie beyond the frame. Additionally, any experience of agency must be considered illusory, as clearly the audience can have no actual effect on events in the film. However, comparisons have been made between *Cloverfield's* subjective camera style and first-person shooter games such as *Half-Life* or *Call of Duty* (Stuart, 2008). As Hud ducks and dives from unexpected explosions and terrifying creatures, the tension, apprehension and kind of attention required by the viewer to keep up is very similar to the engagement required when navigating a gaming world. It could even be speculated that Hud's unusual name is a reference to the gaming term Heads Up Display.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the gaming elements offered by the marketing, which are more akin to puzzle-solving, translate into a film style which also has a game-play element to it, this time linking to a kind of game in which the levels of agency are much higher. Illusory or not, these pleasures are experienced to some extent by those involved in both the film and the ARG. Together they contribute to an immersive cinematographic experience that viewers feel they have an element of control over.

It is important, however, to recognise that these experiences are constructed and controlled, to an extent, by filmmakers and marketers. Users may create their own narratives but they do so with information fed to them at specific times, in a specific order. It is perhaps for this reason that Telotte refers to often to an agency 'effect' (Telotte, 2001: 36). This reveals an intriguing tension inherent in the term 'viral marketing'. The 'viral' element specifically requires a degree of agency and autonomy on the part of the consumer. They must take the message and pass it on of their own free will. This way the message often spreads faster and appears more 'organic', resulting in a softer sell which appeals to audiences used to being bombarded by more traditional advertising. But this agency also allows them to take the message and change it, or even reject it and, more dangerously, advise others to do the same. Marketers are thus caught between the desire to encourage agency, and the need to control or limit it to avoid distortion of the message or negative word-of-mouth. This tension leads to a constantly shifting relationship between producer and consumer, which requires further investigation if it is to be properly understood.

Finally, Murray's third pleasure, transformation, occurs when the text allows a player to take on another identity (Murray, 1997: 154). The websites provide this in terms of placing the viewer in the role of investigator. Within the film, the viewer is thrust into the role of party documenter Hud and remains there until his unfortunate demise. After this Rob takes over but addresses the camera directly in a kind of final testimonial. At this point the viewer returns from the role of documenter, and becomes a removed witness of the event. This transformation prevents viewers from being completely immersed in the world at the crucial point when the 'game' ends but also reinforces the status of the film as found footage, keeping them immersed within the reality premise. Rob reminds us of our status as spectators when he says 'you probably know more about it than I do'. He doesn't know how right he is.

Having used Murray's terms as a basis for this analysis, it is important to point out that establishing such a theoretical framework is not without its problems. Even recent scholarship

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<sup>8</sup> The term used to indicate the display in a game-play situation which offers information about the character's health levels, weapons held, stage of game-play etc

can fall a few steps behind both the constant changes in technology, and a market that moves with the ever shifting desires of the consumer. Murray's work was published in 1997, in a decade when being online in a virtual world was imagined to require VR headsets, to almost be physically transported into another realm. In 2012, having an almost constant online presence had become a part of daily life for many consumers. Thus it is possible to argue that Murray's sense of the words 'immersion', 'interactivity', and 'transformation' in particular come from a very different frame of reference and may need to be adapted for the web 2.0 generation. However, even if they do require a little re-contextualisation for contemporary audiences and technologies, the fundamental ideas behind these 'pleasures' remain pertinent to an analysis of online narratives today.

### ***Narrative Extension and Expansion of the Filmic World***

At first glance, it seems reasonable to suggest that the websites which make up the *Cloverfield* ARG are part of what Jenkins calls a 'transmedia narrative', where the narrative of one film is expanded across several media platforms. It expands the world of the film but may also fragment the narrative, which, Jenkins argues, allows the consumer to make their own connections between fragments and read the narrative in their own way (Jenkins, 2006a: 121).

However, upon closer inspection it appears that the *Cloverfield* sites were only loosely connected to the narrative of the film, and possibly not even enough to be described as 'fragments' of the same story. When the viewer came to the film, having been part of the online investigation, there was no mention of Tagruato and the only reference to Slusho was by way of a logo on a t-shirt. Few questions were answered about what the creature was or where it had come from. Furthermore, an entire narrative was built around two characters that did not feature in the film past the initial party scenes.

One of photos from 1-18-08.com revealed a good luck message to Rob from Jamie, who also appeared on MySpace. It soon became clear that Jamie's boyfriend, Teddy, also worked in Japan. After more searching, the website jamieandteddy.com was discovered (figures 10 and 11). Jamie and Teddy using this site to send each other video messages, again updated in real time. Suddenly, Teddy stopped communicating. Jamie received a mysterious package containing Slusho! merchandise, something wrapped in tin foil and a note from Teddy. He claimed he had been kidnapped by Tagruato, asked her to get the message to someone and told her not to eat the substance wrapped in foil. She promptly consumed the mystery substance and appeared somewhat intoxicated in the next few videos before announcing she was 'over' Teddy and was going to Rob's party, linking the end of the online narrative to the start of the on-screen narrative. Beyond this link, the Jamie and Teddy story is not referred to at all in the film. If anything, the Jamie and Teddy sites constructed a separate but related narrative that ran within the same filmic world as that of the film text.

The idea of immersion in another world or realm has great relevance to film which, as Victor Perkins points out, does not end at the edge of the frame in the minds of the audience. On-screen always presupposes off-screen and beyond the frame there is a world, albeit a fictional world, in which there are many possibilities that may or may not occur within the narrative of the film. We bring to this world knowledge from our own, as well as knowledge that the film explains for us - 'to be in a world is to know the partiality of knowledge and the boundaries of vision – to be aware that there is always a bigger picture' (Perkins, 2005: 20). The *Cloverfield* websites offer an opportunity for viewers to consider the possibilities that might exist beyond the frame, but are not explicated in the text. They encourage us to consider all the possible realities of this world as if it were just that: real.

Whether or not this expansion of the filmic world actually requires a corresponding aesthetic from the film itself to be effective is debatable, even unlikely. It would seem that films with subjective camerawork like *Cloverfield* and *Blair Witch* are perhaps the exception rather than the rule. Many films shot more traditionally like *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, USA, 2008) have had extremely successful viral campaigns attached, suggesting that although the link between viral sites and film style is effective, it is equally possible for the filmic world to be sufficiently expanded in the minds of the audience by the sites alone. However it is possible



that they are enhanced or may be more effective when the two are combined, or as Telotte suggests, when they are working towards the same effect (Telotte, 2001).

### **Why Go Viral?**

Complex viral campaigns like those described here are often expensive and time consuming to create and run, particularly if they involve live events. They can create an enormous amount of buzz around a film, but why might media conglomerates look to immersive campaigns to market mainstream Hollywood films? The answer to this can only be provided by marketing executives themselves, but to conclude this chapter, I would like to offer three possible motivations for Hollywood's use of viral marketing strategies.

Firstly, the *Cloverfield* ARG actively drives audiences into the cinema. The only way to solve the puzzle is to go and see the film. However, it is arguable that the kind of dedicated audience who would follow such a campaign would have gone to see the film anyway. Additionally, such audiences are actually quite small in number in comparison with desired attendance figures. For example, the unfiction.com community had around 30,561 registered users at the time of writing. It is hard to estimate how many 'lurkers' or unregistered players came across the websites, and relating hits on the sites to box office takings is not a perfect indicator of the impact of the site on box office takings.

Virals also have the potential to create a cyclical viewing pattern. The websites point to the film as the answer to the puzzle. So the viewer interrogates it, slows down, rewinds it and plays it back. When the film cannot answer questions, for example, about the origin of the *Cloverfield* monster, the viewer goes back to the websites, which in turn point back to the film as documentary evidence. From a pragmatic industry point of view, this viewing pattern may encourage multiple viewings and therefore increase DVD sales. It also means that buzz can be sustained before and after opening weekend as people continue to try and solve the mysteries well after viewing. From a more creative standpoint, this could be viewed as an attempt to expand the viewing experience in an imaginative and involving way.

Secondly, the increasing use of virals could suggest that Hollywood is looking to the pleasures offered by other media (such as the internet or online gaming) in order to compete with new media technologies, and reach out to an audience which spends an increasing amount of time online. In an era of media convergence it has become something of an imperative to create truly multi-platform viewing experiences, which extend beyond the big screen and, most often, onto the smaller mobile screens where consumers seem to be spending more and more of their time.

John Belton similarly argued that the development of widescreen technologies and 3D film can be viewed as an attempt by Hollywood to compete with other leisure activities by emphasising its experiential nature (Belton, 1990). Cinerama and Cinemascope 'engulfed' audiences, or at least appeared to, and engaged them more actively, 'creating for them a compelling illusion of participation in the action on screen' (Belton, 1990: 185). It broke the boundary between active and passive spectatorship, the former often applied to theatre audiences and the latter to cinema audiences. Widescreen occupied a space between the two, its wider ratio providing a greater sense of presence for the viewer, who could no longer take in all the information with one glance but had to actively follow the action on screen to make sense of it. Cinerama is also described as an 'attempt to mimic the theatre in terms of its sense of participation' (Belton, 1990: 193). Similarly, one could argue that the combination of immersive marketing and aesthetics is an attempt to not only to compete with the gaming industry and the internet, but to try and recreate some of the pleasures offered by those media (including those identified by Murray) within the cinematic experience.

However, as Belton notes of 3D and widescreen technologies, that sense of participation has limitations, as he frequently refers to it as an 'illusion'. Although videogames and films may share aesthetic qualities, with many videogames described by reviewers as 'cinematic', what ultimately divides them is that the viewer cannot physically affect anything in the filmic world. Espen J. Aarseth suggests that what makes a game different from a film is the fact that 'non-

trivial effort' is required to allow the reader to traverse the text (Aarseth, 2002: 22). As he puts it: 'games raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention' (Aarseth, 2002: 23). Aarseth's interests lie in defending the videogame as a worthy medium in its own right and not resorting to theories of narrative which link them to a medium of higher perceived cultural value in order to validate it. In contrast, one could argue that Hollywood has in fact acknowledged the cultural status of videogames, and has seen fit to adopt non-narrative elements of games in order to emulate the added values that make gaming so different. The borrowing of game-like perspectives can offer an *illusion* [my italics] of intervention and some of the pleasures that this can provide. Both *Cloverfield* and its ARG demand more 'non-trivial effort' than films or their marketing campaigns have previously demanded of viewers. This could also point to Hollywood's attempts to appeal to an audience steeped in gaming culture, and therefore willing to make that effort to gain an enriched filmic experience. Bryce and Rutter suggest that gaming offers 'the intimate sense of consumer as producer' (Bryce and Rutter, 2002: 78) that Hollywood cannot, but this seems to be what Hollywood is attempting to provide, via marketing strategies which treat them as agents capable and desirous of producing their own narratives, even if this is within a tight set of limitations.

Finally, virals can engage with and gain the trust of a difficult and influential audience group. PR and communications firm Burston-Marsteller commissioned research dubbing this group 'e-fluentials', defining them as consumers 'who have exponential influence shaping and driving public opinion through the Internet and throughout the offline world' (Burston Marsteller, 2001). Whether today's e-fluentials are still the same people, doing the same things, or even exist, is debatable. In an age where this audience group is almost permanently connected (particularly via mobile devices), the impulse to investigate, buy or review any kind of product online has become something of an automatic reflex for the average consumer.

Having acknowledged this, there does seem to be a specific target audience for these campaigns. Judging by the online presence, effort and knowledge required by some campaigns, these are not your average surfers. Paramount's creation of these complex sites recognises an active, inquisitive and highly communicative audience and attributes a certain level of importance to them. Viral marketing could be seen as an attempt to control or negotiate the buzz this audience group could instigate, and to deliver an online experience they will talk about positively. It also appeals to them by offering a privileged viewing position. Viewers who have been involved with 1-18-08 bring a wealth of knowledge and character information to the film that uninitiated viewers will not have. This is not to say that the experience is less valid for non-players, but that it will be dramatically different and richer for those familiar with the ARG.

Pushing this idea of audience management further, it seems important to note the similarity between the audience group described above and cult media fans. Players of ARGs like 1-18-08 are engaging in recognisably fannish or even cultish behaviour. Hours of their time are spent gathering and analysing information that bystanders would probably see as pointless or trivial. Virals encourage this activity and could even be an attempt to create a cult audience. Beyond selling the film, 1-18-08 constructs and then promotes the fan experience itself, by producing something which looks and feels like an active, grassroots community around an unreleased property. It creates the space and conditions for fandom to occur whilst at the same time utilising it as part of a wider marketing exercise.

However, according to Henry Jenkins, fan communities are by definition, self –created:

Expansive *self-organizing* groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations and fantasies [my italics] (Jenkins, 2006b: 137)

If fandoms are corporate creations rather than organically formed communities, this has implications for the ways in which we currently define fan communities. Although it appears that ARG communities create these backstories themselves, they do so with information fed to them by producers, and their narratives will ultimately arrive at a corporate-sanctioned

conclusion. These new fandoms may require us to rethink how we conceptualise cult media fandom.

Viral marketing demands an active and engaged user to interact with these sites, becoming involved in the world of the film before and after viewing in a way that affects their relationship with the text, and ultimately the viewing experience. The positioning of the viewer as investigator creates an immersive experience, which is intensified when used in conjunction with aesthetics working towards the same effect. This indicates a dramatic shift in the way Hollywood is trying to connect with and cultivate audiences both on and offline and may even cause us to rethink ways in which we have previously understood these audiences.

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